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PART TWO

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

- [2] *The purpose of Part Two is (1) to describe the life-cycle or development of the individual Ovimbundu from birth until adulthood, (2) to analyse the Umbundu educational process, and (3) to indicate and evaluate elements in this process that are or may be significant for the educational work of Christian missions among the Ovimbundu.*

Chapters V, VI, and VII describe the Umbundu life-cycle and consist largely of Umbundu narrative given in direct translation. The principal source is a composite manuscript compiled for classroom use from the contributions of a number of Ovimbundu.¹ Comments and other Umbundu material are interpolated from time to time into this principal source.

In Chapter VIII there is an analysis of Umbundu development. The evaluations are in Chapters IX, X, and XI.

CHAPTER V

THE UMBUNDU BABY

Birth

- 844 WHEN birth occurs in the house, it is supposed to take place on the grinding-stone (*olumbambo*). That this was so is indicated by the folk-tales and proverbs which refer to the place of birth as *polumbambo*, or *hewe lioku cita* (on the stone of giving birth).² In this case, and especially if a woman is giving birth for the first time, she may be assisted by older women of the village. These, in the case of widows, may be relatives of the husband, or in the case of wives of householders, they will be his relatives by marriage. A woman's own mother may assist, but when she lives in a different village she is unlikely to attend. It would not be proper for the

¹ This source is given in quotation but without further reference. The chief contributors were R. Kavita Evambi, of Ciyaka; Abeso Ngulu and A. Siku Nunda, both of Bailundu; R. Kalupetaka of Ngalandi; I. Kayalo of Viye; Ndondi students of the normal classes and several women there. It was compiled and edited (in Umbundu) by Pedro Paulo of the Currie Institute staff.

² Cf. the "birth-stool" of the Hebrews (or Egyptians), *vide* Exod. i. 16.

844 husband's mother (whether uterine or classificatory) to attend the labour of her daughter-in-law. The husband does not attend. As Mr. Hambly's informant phrased it, 'The child would be ashamed to be born.'¹ It seems that the husband's non-attendance may be connected with the danger to him of the blood.² No other man will be present unless delayed labour entails the intervention of a medical practitioner, especially a diviner. Resort will not be had to outside aid until it seems impossible otherwise for the child to be born, and nowadays even where modern medical aid is available, often it will only be resorted to after the woman has been in labour for more than twenty-four hours³—sometimes much more, and then when it is already too late. Difficult delivery may be caused by:

- (a) *Broken taboos*, as, for example, theft, either by the mother or the father. Only after confession can someone go out and steal something, after which the child 'consents' to be born.
- (b) *Adultery* on the part of the mother, which must be confessed before the child will 'consent' to be born. The father's adultery may also cause trouble at this time, but this is more often believed to be the cause of a disease in his offspring known as *onjamba*. Failing confession of the above faults, a diviner may be called, but his diagnosis may more often indicate
- (c) *Sorcery*, to which difficult labour, along with many other ills of life, may be attributed.⁴
- (d) It is also believed that in some cases a woman may herself refuse to give birth and may extend her pregnancy far beyond the nine months' period, the limits of which, and its method of reckoning, are not understood. Such cases as

¹ Hambly, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

² Among church-members the husband often attends the birth and is sometimes the only attendant.

³ A labour of twelve or fourteen hours is considered quite usual, and a shorter one as light.

754 ⁴ Sorcery, together with ill will and anger recognized as its principal roots, are great dangers to a woman giving birth. Anyone who dislikes the woman in labour, or even one who has ever shown ill will against her, will stay strictly away from the birth. While a woman is in labour all women of the village are expected to stay at home and refrain from ordinary activities—to commune with the spirits. As one of many proverbs has it: *Ukume nda o cita, vu saalela: odu cita lukume, odu cita kucece*; 'Your fellow, if she gives birth, you stay in: childbirth of your fellow, is childbirth of yours.'

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have come to my notice finally turned out to be fibroid 845
tumours, but it is held that there are women who have
extended their periods of pregnancy to two years and then
had normal deliveries. I failed to learn what was gained or
intended by this procedure.

It is not to be inferred that difficult deliveries or prolonged 844
labour are the rule, for while they do occur, they are rather the
exception. In 1857 Magyar observed that 'women ... are ... very
fecund and except in few cases bear happily the pains of child-
birth'.¹ Such a statement would now have to be classed as a bit
optimistic, but it has its point, speaking comparatively with our
own society in mind. During labour the woman usually kneels,
but in some regions she stands holding on to a post which the
husband has put into the floor of the hut for this purpose.² 'With
the breaking of the foetal bag the baby, which has been in the
warmth, feels the air and begins to cry, *Na, ña, ña*.'³ From this
cry is derived the word for baby, *oñaña*.

Hereupon I turn to the general narrative:

'When the mother recognizes that her time for giving birth has
come, if this is her first,⁴ she tells her husband to call the elder
women who are skilled in causing to give birth. When the baby is
born they arrange to cut (the cord of) the navel. First they tie it
up with a piece of rag just picked up in the house or from the
refuse heap, then they pick up a porridge-stick or a piece of fire-
wood over which they stretch the cord and cut it with a knife⁵
(which has not been boiled, for they do not arrange beforehand the
cloths of the navel nor the knives for cutting as do Europeans).
Everything they look for after the baby has already come. The
knife and the porridge-stick they tie up to the roof of the house and

¹ Magyar, *Reisen in Süd-Afrika*, p. 283 (foot of page).

² e.g. in Cívula. The Umbundu hut, whether round or rectangular, has no
central pole. Does this custom indicate that in former times there was a central
pole?

³ From a statement of an old woman at Ndoni, other parts of which have
been incorporated in the general narrative. She also stated that ordinarily a baby
was not 'received', but was born on to the floor of the hut. From other infor-
mants and from the observations of my wife, I think this is the case only when a
woman is alone and has no attendants (q.v. *infra*).

⁴ Lit., if she is *omumua*, i.e. one who has not yet given birth.

⁵ Hambly's note that a hoe is used to cut a girl's cord and an arrow to cut a
boy's is 'theoretically' or symbolically correct, but nowadays people do not
bother to follow the symbolism unless convenient (Hambly, *op. cit.*, p. 129).

844 never use them again. The placenta they put in a broken gourd and bury it at the corner of the house or under the threshold: in the case of a boy outside the house, and in the case of a girl within.

'After this then they wash' the baby and anoint it with oil, and they tie a girdle of rag around its little loins. When all is ready, then some step outside and begin to shout for joy (*oku ulula*) saying, *Ulú! Ulú! Ulú!*² There has come a great big man here. Or if the baby is a girl they say, *Ulú! Ulú! Ulú!* There has come a girl here! A girl for the pounding-rock, *we-e-e!* *Ulú! Ulú! Ulú!* We are very grateful that she has increased our number.

'When the people hear the shouting, they hasten with joy to greet the parents and to congratulate them. Some seize the hand of the male parent and greet him saying, You have done well, you have begotten³ for us a youth for the road, and a gatherer of fire-wood for the club-house. In the case of a girl, they say, A girl for the pounding-rock, the grinding stone is dirty.⁴

'In case the woman had already borne before, it is usual for her just to do it all alone by herself. She herself cuts the (cord of the) navel and buries the placenta. Many prefer to give birth in the field. Should a child have been born in the field (the cord of) his navel may be cut with a blade of corn in case there is no knife at hand. To tie up the cord she may just tear a bit of rag from her own cloth. When she comes to the village, the people will notice that she carries her basket on her head and the child in her hand, and straightway they greet her.'

846 It will be seen from this that childbirth is nothing if not simple among the Ovimbundu. Immediately after giving birth the mother purifies herself by washing in a running stream. She is accompanied only by her mentor. There is a lying-in period (until the cord falls from the navel) to be observed by the child and the mother, but it seems that in these days it is often observed in the [539] breach. In the folk-tale of 'Baby and his Elder Sister' (*Nãña la Kota liaye*), the mother did not observe her part of the taboo but left the house to Elder Sister, and it was perhaps for that reason that Baby took vengeance by eating up the beans left cooking on the fire while no one was looking.

¹ The water is warmed by being taken into the mouth and then squirted on to the baby.

² The sound made by plucking at the lips while shouting.

³ The verb *oku cita*, to bear or to beget, is used of males and of females without distinction.

⁴ i.e. needs attention.

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the fire, while no one was looking. Before going on to that period, 846
the narrative will tell a little about the birth of

*Twins (Olonjamba).*¹ 'If twins are born, when they have finished 845
cutting (the cords of) the navels they bury their placentas out of
doors at a cross-road. After washing and anointing them with oil,
they shout saying, *Ulu! Ulu! Ulu!* There have come here a man
and a woman. When the people come, they begin while yet outside
(the hut), to curse² (and continue) until they enter, cursing the
parents. It is called *Ongombo*, The Diviner's Basket. In that way
such children are followed about by all, that none of them may die.
And all the time that such children are growing, it is done month
by month. The parent comes out and begins to curse the people
who are in the village, and then all come from their houses and
follow cursing her.'

In the case of triplets, when they are weaned, one is given to the
king.³

As soon as the midwives have finished their task, the father may 844●
come in and take up the child, but men do not 'like' to hold a
child which is still 'red' (i.e. not yet black) and whose 'neck is not
yet strong'. Should a woman abort (*pulumuisa*), or should the [847]
child be stillborn or die at birth, the loss is accepted philosophically,
quoting the proverb: 845
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Cinene ombenje akolovi hacimueko.

The main thing (is) the gourd jug, the shavings (are) nothing.

Should the mother also die, then they quote:

Olāi ka huatele, ocimunga ca enda lovava.

A fish (he) did not catch, the bracelet went with water.

Should a young woman/complain that her baby is too small, the [856]
others may remind her:

Esaila olio osanji.

The egg that (is) the chicken.

Should she complain that her baby does not grow properly, they
will say:

Ka ci kuli omōlā ombia, omōlā omumu o kula

It does not grow the child of (a) pot, (the) child of (a) person grows.

¹ Lit., Elephants. The reference is to the names given to twins: *Njamba*
(Elephant), *Hosi* (Lion), or *Ngeve* (Hippopotamus).

² *Tukillā*, which literally means to call *hard* names.

³ I knew of one such case in Civa.

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One of the commonest forms of punishment for sorcery was, and still is, banishment. Only the chief could pronounce the death penalty. Charges of sorcery are sometimes brought today to civil courts and to church courts under the guise of "poisoning". (1)

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There are obvious gaps in the information on Umbundu religion and magic e.g. on spirits other than those of ancestors; on ritual connected with the ancestors; on productive and protective magic; on the work of the medicine-man as distinct from the diviner, and on the functions of the two separate offices of family priest. From existing accounts, however, Umbundu magico-religious concepts would appear to have much in common with those of the peoples to the east of the Plateau, and many of the words used for these concepts (*ngombo*; *ahamba*, *wanga*, *nganga* e.g.) are in fact the same. These peoples have been described in another section of the Survey. (2)

THE LIFE CYCLE

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Childs' chapters on infancy, childhood, and adolescence form the main part of his book, and his treatment of the subject is much more detailed and on a deeper level than information offered by other writers, (3) and should be consulted.

BIRTH

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A woman remains in her husband's village for the birth of her children. During the first birth, she is generally assisted by older women of the village, usually relatives of the husband. No man is present unless delayed labour entails the presence of a medical practitioner, or a diviner. Difficult delivery is said to be caused by broken taboos, adultery on the part of the mother, sorcery, or the woman's own refusal to give birth. There is little ceremony connected with childbirth, and a woman may give birth to her second and later children alone when she is in the fields. There is a customary lying-in period until the cord falls from the navel, but this is frequently ignored today.

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Twins are welcomed but are considered prodigies whose birth requires the administrations of an *ocimbanda*. (4) Soon after the birth, and every month while the children are growing, the whole village takes part in a ceremony to preserve their lives. In the case of triplets, one is given to the paramount chief. (5)

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Naming usually takes place, in the case of a first-born, on the day of its birth. Childs notes several factors:

(a) The name (*onduko*) should have been borne by a relative, whether living or dead, whose character and state of well-being are satisfactory; sometimes the child may be considered the re-incarnation of the deceased relative after whom he is named.†

(1) Childs, personal communication.

(2) McCulloch, 1951, pp. 72-83.

(3) Hamblly, (2) 1934, pp. 212-33, and Cushman, 1944.

(4) Ennis, 1945.

(5) Childs, 1949, p. 83.

† [Childs, op. cit., p. 87-]

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of this symbolism relating to occupations of males and females 842 respectively, is obvious.

Many women bear children when they are away in the fields, but 844 help at home is often given. The mothers of the wife and of the husband may not be present at the confinement. No childless woman may be near during the confinement or convalescence. The father may not be present or "the child would be ashamed to be born." Before and during her pregnancy a woman feeds her husband with a prickly plant which is mixed in his food; this makes him faithful (784) to her.

The abdomen is bound after delivery in order to keep the uterus in position. There is a very small amount of bleeding after childbirth; in fact the flow of blood is quite finished in two or three days. The nearer the diet comes to that of the white man the greater the bleeding at delivery. A pregnant woman may not beat a drum, or she will bear a drum. A woman who sees the blood from circumcision of a male will not have any children.

When a female child is born, the umbilical cord is cut with a hoe to ensure that the female will be a good worker in the field. The cord of a male is cut with an arrow to insure good hunting. A newly born child receives a drink of beer, and a cord is tied round its waist. This is not for support; it is the string from which, much later, the lower garment hangs. Girls do not menstruate until they are fifteen 841 or even seventeen years of age. During the months after first menstruation a girl advances rapidly from childhood to womanhood.

The medicines that women take to secure abortions are bitter. 847 A woman will refuse quinine because she thinks it will cause abortion. It is certain that twins are welcome among the Ovimbundu, but there are special observances connected with their birth and death. A twin 845 birth is not thought to imply dual fatherhood. Twins are called Njamba ("elephant") and Hosi ("lion"). Although twins are of opposite sexes each receives one of the two names. Njamba is the first born, and Hosi is the second to be delivered. The medicine-man holds a ceremony to cure the mother of twins. The afterbirth of twins is placed in two gourds and carried outside the village for burial by two midwives. The mother of twins must wear round her neck the horn of an antelope given by the medicine-man. She has to blow this when crossing a river, meeting a crowd of people, or seeing a hawk overhead. People laugh at her and in fun say that she is a pig or a bitch. "The woman says the same kind of words to them." Children may be adopted, but they never really 597